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SUBJECT: GABON: RITUAL CRIME ON THE RISE

REF: 07 LIBREVILLE 0082

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) The number of suspected ritual killings in Gabon is on the rise ahead of scheduled April 27 local elections. Members of civil society and some religious leaders have denounced this practice. Government has had little to say on the subject, however. There has been extensive coverage of these incidents in local media, though no perpetrators have been conclusively identified or prosecuted. END SUMMARY.

On the Rise

¶2. (U) As preparations for the April 27 local elections move forward, Gabon is experiencing an increase in suspected ritual killings. Although the government has not released official data, the Gabonese NGO "l'Association de Lutte Contre les Crimes Rituels" (ALCR) estimates that least 12 ritual murders occurred in February alone. While the numbers cannot be confirmed, local press has reported several gruesome discoveries of mutilated bodies found on the beach, near other bodies of water or--in one instance--outside a soccer stadium. Recently, a body of a teenaged girl was found during daylight on the beach within a mile of the Embassy. Among the many drivers that passed the body before it was removed, an Embassy FSN investigator confirmed that it had been mutilated.

¶3. (U) Ritual killings, often of children, occur in many African countries. Some contend that the problem is particularly concentrated in central Africa. Gabonese observers report that the problem of ritual killings has historically worsened in periods before elections. According to local informants, ritual killings occur when a powerful and/or wealthy individual requests that a sorcerer or "fetisheur" carry out a ceremony to assure achievement of a desired goal (such as victory in an election). The fetisheur kills or contracts a killing to obtain body parts (generally blood, tongue, and sexual organs) for the ceremony. The victims are often children, but also include adults (reftel).

Public Reaction

¶4. (U) The Gabonese public has generally reacted with revulsion to the latest upsurge in ritual crime. Some religious leaders have spoken out, and the president of the National Assembly condemned the practice when opening the latest session of parliament on March 4. Other government leaders have had little to say, however, and the police have not been able to identify any suspected perpetrator.

¶5. (U) Some civil society groups have attempted to further spotlight this problem and prompt government action. On March 8 ALCR, accompanied by representatives from other NGOs and religious organizations, organized a press conference to condemn the practice of ritual crime and urge a more effective government response. Some speakers at the press conference attributed the silence by senior Gabonese leaders, and the lack of government action, on the complicity by some powerful individuals in ritual crime. Speakers alleged that even when a perpetrator is apprehended, the powerful figure commissioning the crime generally goes unpunished.

¶6. (U) The Embassy provided a small grant to ALCR in 2007 to organize a one-day conference to draw attention to the problem of ritual crime.

¶7. (SBU) UNICEF Country Representative Youssouf Abdel-Jelil told the Ambassador that UNICEF would like to commission a Situational Analysis of the problem in Gabon. He is looking into funding for the Analysis, and would like to bring in a non-Gabonese expert to team up with a Gabonese to conduct it. Abdel-Jelil believes the study would help identify the target population of the crimes, and the circumstances of the abductions and the murders reported to date. With these

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results, UNICEF would be able to inform and work with the Government of Gabon on ways to halt the crimes. The Ambassador urged the UNICEF rep to move quickly on the Analysis, and advise the USG and other donors of its results.

COMMENT

¶8. (SBU) Ritual murder does not appear to be prosecuted as vigorously, or at least not as successfully, as other types of murder in Gabon. Like FGM and other negative social practices, ritual crime can be combatted with effective local leadership and sound strategies. We would be grateful to hear from other posts who have participated in successful strategies to combat ritual crime. End Comment.
REDDICK